DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 881 CS 214 943

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TITLE Effective Composition Instruction: Washington State Community College Instructors Respond.
PUB DATE 14 Jul 95
NOTE 40p.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; *Community Colleges; *Instructional Effectiveness; Rhetoric; School Surveys; Teacher Education; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teaching Methods; Teaching Styles; Two Year Colleges; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Teacher Surveys; *Washington

ABSTRACT

To determine what traits characterize instructors who enjoy the greatest success in teaching composition to community college students, a questionnaire was sent to 17 community colleges throughout Washington State. Chairpersons were asked to give the questionnaire to those instructors they considered most effective in teaching freshman composition courses; 38 surveys were returned representing 14 community colleges. In the survey, questions 1-4 solicited information about each instructor's educational and professional background; question 5 asked instructors to characterize an effective composition instructor; questions 6-11 asked how instructors identify and help students with various backgrounds, abilities and motivations; questions 12-15 solicited responses concerning factors that promote and hinder student success; and question 16 allowed instructors to add additional insights not covered in their responses. The survey revealed that many instructors bring both secondary and university-level teaching experience to their community college teaching. Furthermore, since respondents averaged 12.8 years of community college teaching experience, their responses reflect significant years "in the system." Significantly, the majority of community college composition instructors (60%) felt poorly prepared by their undergraduate and graduate studies to teach college composition. Few had courses that specifically addressed how composition should be taught. Most instructors believe that for a composition instructor to be effective he or she must have a superb knowledge base and a deep commitment to the importance of teaching writing. Instructors recognized distinct differences between students that succeed and students who are at-risk. The survey instrument is included. (TB)

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ED 384 881

EFFECTIVE COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION: Washington State Community College Instructors Respond

by Scott Douglas Loucks

Submitted July 14, 1995

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Instructional Strategies

Introduction

What traits characterize instructors who enjoy the greatest success in teaching community college students? What are their backgrounds and philosophies, and frustrations? What strategies do they employee to help *all* students achieve significant outcomes?

My interest in answering these and other questions developed from my study and analysis of students involved with placement testing and those whom I interviewed about their performance in first-year college composition courses. The data I had collected from students and the patterns in their responses suggested that a critical question regarding success in composition might be answered by a systematic study of instructors who teach freshman composition and the instructional strategies they employ. I hypothesized that an analysis of the most effective methodologies in teaching the kinds of students diagnosed in the first study and characterized in the second study would suggest helpful strategies for all instructors. I also assumed that such a study might guide institutions, both those that train composition teachers and those that employ them into more effective teacher preparation and institutional organization.

The goal of this study was to contact effective community college composition instructors throughout Washington State and collect from them information on teaching backgrounds, perceptions about students, and teaching strategies useful to college writing instructors and others desiring effective writing programs.

I hypothesized that there would be similar traits and strategies among the most effective teachers of community college composition. While in my other studies students were asked to characterize their instructors, in the third component of this research, I wanted the most effective instructors throughout the state to characterize themselves, to provide a description of the students they teach, and their own teaching methodologies. I felt that if teachers could characterize their students and analyze, in that context, their own approach to teaching composition, that greater understanding of effective pedagogy would result. My goal was to have instructors share their experience, as if speaking with other instructors, to the benefit of everyone seeking a more effective approach to teaching post-secondary composition.

Methodology

Method of Inquiry

I determined that a survey in the form of a questionnaire was the most expedient method of addressing community college composition instructors throughout the state. I developed and

refined a questionnaire (See Appendix B). Of the sixteen questions, 1-4 solicited information primarily about each instructor's educational and professional background. Question 5 asked instructors to characterize an effective composition instructor. Questions 6-11 asked how instructors identify and help students with various backgrounds, abilities, and motivations. Questions 12-15 solicited responses concerning factors that promote and hinder student success, and ways the college could improve student achievement. Question 16 allowed instructors to add any additional insights, philosophies, ideas, or methodologies not covered in their responses to questions 1-15.

My rationale for the focus of these questions was to gain greater understanding about areas critical to instructional success:

1. Instructor preparation for teaching composition.
2. Instructor perception of effective pedagogy.
3. Instructional strategies which assume a multiplicity of student backgrounds, characteristic of many community college classrooms.
4. Instructional and institutional strategies that promote the achievement of all students.

By examining similarities and differences in responses, I hoped to develop conclusions about ways to improve instruction that would have practical application for all composition teachers.

I mailed surveys with a cover letter to seventeen community colleges throughout the state. My accompanying letter explained

the intent and the scope of the survey and asked the English Department Chairperson (or a person who held Chairperson responsibilities) to select the instructors "most effective in teaching freshman composition courses" to respond to the survey. From the beginning, the intent of the survey was not to get a response from the majority of community college teachers, but responses from the "best" and/or most effective instructors as judged by their supervisors. In this way, I hoped that my survey would reveal the most effective instructional strategies from teachers experiencing the greatest success.

Response/Respondents

Thirty eight surveys were returned, representing fourteen community colleges: Bellevue, Centralia, Edmonds, Everett, Highline, Moses Lake, North Seattle, Olympic, Seattle Central, South Seattle, Skagit Valley, Spokane Falls, Wenatchee Valley, and Yakima Valley. The numbers of respondents and the range of community colleges represented offers much opportunity for analysis and discussion.

Quantifying their teaching experience, instructors averaged 12.8 years at the community college level. The least experienced community college instructor had just completed her first year; the most experienced instructor had completed 35 years of community college teaching. Nearly half (18, or 47%) of the instructors had also taught high school English an average of 8.4

years. Eighteen instructors had also taught at the university level, averaging 3.8 years of experience. This experience was usually gained in conjunction with graduate level study.

Value of Preparation

Most Significant Problems with Preparation

When asked about how well their graduate and undergraduate training prepared them for teaching composition, 23 of the instructors (60%) responded that their training was of very little or no value to their teaching composition.

Typical of the responses was that of Pat Nerison, from Edmonds Community College who wrote:

> Not at all. I had traditional literature instruction . . . it didn't deal with teaching writing.

Dr. Gordon Leighton from Bellevue Community College wrote:

> I'll be frank. I took about three education courses and found them to be a colossal waste of time and money. There wasn't much specific preparation in graduate school. We were essentially 'thrown to the dogs.' Most English Graduate faculty at that time felt that Composition was a second-class subject that really shouldn't be taught at the college level.

M. Barton from North Seattle Community College wrote:

"Not at all . . . I didn't understand how people could *not* write well, still less how to teach them."

Many instructors explained that they rely on their own writing experience, from graduate and undergraduate courses, to teach writing. Paulene Christensen from Bellevue Community College wrote:

"I teach my students what I *wish* someone had taught me."

Some of the other responses included:

"My preparation for teaching writing was almost totally inadequate."

". . . preparation for teaching comp = 0"

"Not too well. No course in teaching writing was available at that time."

"No emphasis or instruction was given in how to write or how to teach writing."

"Except of the experience of being a T.A., not at all."

"I had no graduate schooling or preparation to teach composition."

"When I began teaching composition, I had to fall back on what I had learned in high school!"

Nine instructors (24%) said that some of their undergraduate and graduate training was helpful. While most pointed to their undergraduate training as wholly inadequate for composition instruction, a few identified their graduate level work as good preparation.

Mary Symonds from Big Bend Community College wrote:

> A Master's in comp/rhetoric prepared me well in areas of methodology *and* theory. I'm satisfied with that. I would have liked, however, more theory/methods in composition instruction for students at developmental levels, English 101 composition is *different* from English 99 or 98 composition!! And yet, English 101 teachers are often dealing with developmental students as well.

Sixteen percent of the teachers said that their graduate and undergraduate studies prepared them well for teaching composition. Of these, many identified internships and/or coursework in language, linguistics, and rhetoric as most helpful.

When asked about the most irrelevant training or most significant lack of experience in graduate and undergraduate schooling, six instructors, or 16% did not see any university

experience that lacked or was irrelevant. "I learned from *every* class," commented Anne Jackets from Everett Community College.

However, most instructors identified key areas missing from their preparation to teach composition. The majority of respondents saw the most significant lack in their training divided fairly evenly in four major areas: 1) No instruction in rhetoric or composition theory, 2) Education courses that were "useless," 3) No instruction about how to teach writing and writing as a process, and 4) No instruction in how to *evaluate* student writing.

"I needed some coursework in teaching theory and other aspects of pedagogy," noted Steven Quig of North Seattle Community College. "I had no instruction in rhetoric," said Elaine Smith of Yakima Valley Community College.

Four instructors gave resoundingly negative comments about the irrelevance of required education courses. "All my education classes were a waste of time," wrote Nancy Howard of Wenatchee Valley Community College. "My education classes were useless," said Paulene Christiansen of Bellevue Community College. Molly Tenenbaum of North Seattle Community College explained:

> The worst experiences I had were in classes in the Education department. I was miserable in those classes and very nearly discouraged from teaching.

Five instructors (16%) wrote that their training lacked specific development of effective composition teaching strategies. "I

received university approved secondary and junior college teaching credentials and had no prep in *teaching* writing," noted Pat Nerison of Edmonds Community College. S. Krist of Bellevue Community College wrote, "Bottom line: the most significant lack was a *complete lack*: no one ever taught me how to teach writing."

Most Significant/Positive Relevant Experiences in Preparation

On question four, twenty-five percent of the community college composition instructors responding in this survey said that they benefitted most from interaction with their colleagues. Typical comments included the following:

> The biggest help to me has been the generosity of the more experienced teachers here in sharing their wisdom and insight with me.
>
> Conversations with colleagues.
>
> Visiting, discussing, and planning with my colleagues.
>
> Working with experienced, talented, veteran teachers.
>
> I have probably learned most from meetings with other instructors-- informal, spontaneous interchanges.

Other instructors point to "teaching itself" as the most relevant experience. Still others identified their own experience as writers. Finally, working with students was noted by many as "the greatest teacher." Mary Hyatt of Spokane Community College wrote:

> Most importantly, I was (am) open to students and learning from them. They were very and still are very helpful in evaluating my strategies, assignments, and policies.

Characteristics of an Effective Composition Instructor

Question five of the survey asked teachers to identify what they felt were "the most important characteristics of an effective composition instructor." Among the thirty eight respondents, there were over sixty attributes ascribed to an effective composition instructor, with many of those attributes suggested by only one instructor.

The diversity of response is represented in this partial list of attributes: "humility," "thick skin," "willingness to experiment and test the results," "love of teaching," "critical thinking skill," "tact to suggest that crap is not quality," "a positive outlook," "infinite knowledge of everything," and "sustaining eyesight!" However, while the attributes were most notably diverse, the five

most common responses were: 1) a solid knowledge of subject matter, including recent research, 2) compassion and caring about each individual and student writer at *all* levels of performance, 3) patience, 4) enthusiasm for the subject, and 5) the ability to explain things and clearly communicate to others.

Matching Student Writers and Instructional Strategies

Characteristics of Students Who Typically Excel

When writing instructors were asked to characterize students who excelled in their composition courses, seventy eight individual attributes were listed by the thirty eight instructors. Those characteristics mentioned most frequently were the following, in descending order of frequency:

Characteristic	No. of Instructors Who Listed This Attribute
1. Highly motivated.	11 ..... 29%
2. Read regularly.	9 ..... 24%
3. Hard working.	8 ..... 21%
4. Willing to revise their writing.	6 ..... 16%
5. Older/chronologically mature.	5 ..... 13%
Attend class regularly.	5 ..... 13%

	Willing to try new writing strategies.	5	13%
	Courageous/Willing to take risks	5	13%
6.	Complete assigned work.	4	11%
	Seek help when needed.	4	11%
8.	Received good high school training	3	8%
	Determined/Diligent.	3	8%
	Active interest in the world around them.	3	8%

Additional comments about students who excel, mentioned by more than one instructor, include:

--they ask more questions

--they gain control of the writing process

--they are verbal and fluent

--they take part in discussions

--"they thirst for learning instead of grades"

--they have knowledge of common errors and know strategies of correction

--they have a sense of humor

--they like to write.

Instructional Strategies For Students Who Excel

Instructors listed thirty five different strategies for working with students who typically excel. Five instructors (13%) explained that their instructional strategies did not alter from student to student and that they employed the same strategies with students who typically failed that they used with those who typically excelled. When asked what special strategies she employed, Judith Meyers from Olympic Community College noted: "Few. Most of my energies are directed toward the majority who generally have problems."

Among the instructors who employed special strategies, there were notable trends of response. The top six responses included the following:

1. Praising, encouraging and positive, reinforcing feedback on writing assignments. (Note: This was mentioned by over two thirds of the instructors).
2. Establishing peer editing groups. (Note: Some instructors advocated putting highly skilled students together; others preferred mixing skill levels).
3. Directing students to outside readings (essays, plays, films, etc.), not only to serve as models of writing, but to stir creative thought and imagination.
4. Giving latitude in writing assignments; providing maximum freedom within the discipline of specific assignments.

5. Teaching advanced *stylistic* strategies and encouraging experimentation with structure and style.

6. Publishing and using student papers as models/examples for other students.

Other suggestions noted by more than one instructor included: asking students to revise more often, *challenging* them individually towards even greater achievement, pushing them *to take risks*, developing greater one-to-one (teacher/student) dialogue.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

Instructors listed forty nine unique characteristics of students who typically fail freshman composition. Those characteristics mentioned most frequently include the following:

Characteristics	Number of Instructors Listing This Attribute
1. Attendance problems: low, irregular, not at all.	18 . . . . . 47%
2. Lack of interest and motivation; ambivalence.	14. . . . . 37%
3. Outside distractions: work, school, family crisis.	11 . . . . . 29%
--Insufficient skills; lack of preparation for college-level	11 . . . . . 29%

work.

4. Failure to hand in work or they hand in work late.	6 . . . . . 16%
--Conviction that they can't write; earlier traumatic experience in English.	6 . . . . . 16%
5. Poor reading skills.	5 . . . . . .13%
6. Shows little interest in revising papers.	4 . . . . . .11%
--Low self-esteem.	4 . . . . . .11%

Other characteristics mentioned by more than one instructor include:

--doesn't seek help.

--not committed to quality writing.

--a mechanistic view of writing as a matter of grammar.

--poorly done assignments with little attention to specifics.

--fails to participate/says little in class.

--resents writing as a required course.

--poor study habits/skills.

--immature in attitude/age.

Instructional Strategies For At-Risk Students

The instructors suggested twenty eight distinct strategies for helping students who seemed likely to fail. Many instructors also suggested that proper placement of students is critical and

explained that their college's placement tests for the composition class (such as ASSET) are designed to direct certain students to a more remedial level. In addition, a number of instructors mentioned having little patience/tolerance for students headed for failure. "I admit to having little patience with students who don't come to class or don't do the work--and those are the ones who fail," wrote Molly Tenenbaum from North Seattle Community College. Bruce Reid from Edmonds Community College responded, "Frankly, I'm not big on retention (not cold hearted, exactly, but not wishy washy either)." However, not all teachers held these views. Tom Lorentzen from South Seattle Community College wrote, "I try to be tolerant of all levels of ability, since I was not always as clever as I am today."

Among the responses, however, there were some very dominant strategies that instructors employed to help struggling students. The top six strategies included the following:

1. Individual help/conferences with the students. (This was mentioned by twenty four, or 63% of the instructors responding).
2. Referral to the tutors, developmental courses, and/or the college's writing center.
3. Praise, encouragement, supportive comments on students' papers.
4. Peer group writing/editing, collaborative writing, and/or feedback from stronger student writers.

5. Engage students in the writing process by asking them to "write from the gut" about subjects and experiences that interest them.

6. Recommend that they drop the course.

Other suggestions included:

--Giving them "no fail" writing assignments to increase their confidence.

--Asking them to write self assessments of strengths/weaknesses.

--Telling them that *they* must choose what they want to do.

--Using plenty of examples.

--Setting clear deadlines.

--Allowing them to experience the "logical consequences of their behavior."

--Using computer-aided writing/word processing.

--Allowing students to rewrite their essays for higher scores.

--Using humor.

--Assigning freewriting and journal writing that is never criticized.

--Encouraging reading, especially of "pop" material.

--Trying to make them see that they are there *for themselves*.

--Doing a learning styles inventory and teaching to that.

--Building the students' self-esteem.

--Establishing a rigid attendance policy.

Instructional Strategies Which Promote The Success of All Students

In this question, instructors were asked to identify pedagogical strategies that they employ to promote the learning of all their composition students, not only those at the upper or lower ends of the assessment and grading scales. Six instructors said that they employ the same strategies that they use with students who typically fail and those who typically excel. However, there were notable and specific trends of response. The four most frequent responses, in descending order, were the following:

1. Using peer editing and writing groups.
2. Praising, encouraging, and emphasizing the positive.
3. Interacting with each student, personal attention.
4. Allowing opportunities for revision.

Some of the other responses included:

--Providing models/examples of writing.

--Creating a "positive classroom atmosphere;" a sense of community.

--Providing computer aided instruction.

--Letting students know that they are cared for as individuals and respecting individual differences.

--Reminding students that they must take full responsibility for their success.

--Trying to build confidence and demystify the writing process.

Factors Influencing Student Success

Greatest Hindrances to Student Success

Instructors identified twenty seven distinct hindrances to student success in first year college composition. Six instructors identified hindrances that were related to the college including the size of composition classes, clearly outside students' direct control. The majority of instructors, however, said that the characteristics of the students themselves posed the greatest hindrances to success, consistent with earlier responses. The most commonly mentioned hindrances to student success were:

1. Students lack the skills and preparation for college level work (Note: Twenty-two instructors listed this characteristic; six specifically identified that high schools were at fault, citing students' inability to read and write *critically).*
2. Students lack the time. (Work and family commitments were the most frequently mentioned conflicts).
3. Students lack the motivation and dedication to school.
4. Students lack the *emotional* maturity for college level work.

Additional hindrances mentioned by the instructors included:

--Fear of reading and writing.

--The belief that writing does not matter.

--Lack of self-discipline.

--Refusal to revise.

--Refusal to attend class regularly.

--Lack of understanding the amount of time needed to produce good writing.

--Poor study skills.

--The search for certitude and formulas in all things.

--Ego. (Note: No additional information was given by the instructor who listed this response).

Primary Factors Which Promote Student Success

Teachers in the study identified traits in students that promote success in first year college composition. Overwhelmingly, the traits were student centered; instructors clearly believe that students must take responsibility for their own success. Some of these traits were listed earlier in the questionnaire by the instructors and some are simply the antithesis of the hindrances noted in the previous question. The following characteristics were identified as most significant for student success:

1. Motivation, attitude, and commitment. (This was mentioned by nearly half of the instructors in the survey as the most important student trait for success).
2. Skills and adequate academic preparation in reading and writing. While this was the second most common response (eight instructors listed this trait), it was a distant second to motivation, attitude, and commitment.
3. Encouragement and positive attitude of the instructor (listed by five instructors).
4. Maturity/Age of student.
4. Willingness of student to write and revise.
5. Reading experience/ability.

Other factors that promote student success in first year college composition were noted. They include:

--Proper student placement.
--Campus-wide emphasis on reading and writing skills.
--Intelligence.
--Family background.
--Exposure to multiple points of view.
--Curiosity.
--Imaginative, skillful composition teacher.
--Confidence.
--Regular attendance.
--Faith in the academic system.
--A sense that their words can "render their experience well."

Instructor Control of Factors Influencing Success

This question probed teachers to determine the degree of control they feel over a student's success or failure in first year composition. Nearly all of the instructors felt that they could control and/or influence at least some areas that affected student success or failure. One instructor wrote: "*Every* factor except class size is to some extent within my control."

Listed in descending order are the areas where instructors feel they hold the greatest influence and/or control:

1. Providing a positive learning environment/classroom atmosphere.
2. Building student confidence and self-esteem.
3. Increasing student learning in basic skills.
4. Increasing *some* student motivation for learning.

While some instructors felt powerless in "big issues" such as attendance and student educational and family backgrounds, most felt that they could model positive attitudes, provide supportive learning opportunities, and give guidance that would benefit students. William Hoffman from Highline Community College wrote the following response:

> It is possible to address most problem areas with a reasonable degree of success. However, the major problem in writing classes is the instructor. Poor

expectations, and a poor grasp of compositional process are epidemic in the profession.

Increasing the Probability of Student Success

Instructors' Responses: Plans for Change

When instructors were asked what changes in their own teaching they planned for the next year, six instructors said "none" explaining that they felt they had good strategies already in place. However, the thirty-three other respondents identified thirty-four new strategies they would employ for the next school year. Among the responses, the following three changes were mentioned most frequently:

1. Greater utilization of the computer in classroom.
2. More interactive group learning.
3. New evaluative techniques that will address writing as a process.

Other planned changes included the following:

--Providing/requiring more individual conference time.

--Exploring ways to share information with colleagues..

--Increasing in-class writing.

--Using a new text.

--Increasing knowledge of multi-cultural literature..

--Working for incorporating writing in all classes.

--Supplementing the writing assignments with literature.

--Looking for new tactics to develop audience awareness.

--Providing more opportunities for revision.

--Creating software and handbook of assignments.

--Experimenting with the affect my manner has on student performance.

--Looking at portfolio projects at other schools.

--Networking computers.

--Developing more team teaching.

--Developing new writing assignments.

--Stressing narrative elements in reading and writing.

--Teaching them more ways to be editors.

--Developing a new approach to giving thematic content.

--Giving daily quizzes to promote attendance.

--Making students masters of their own learning.

Institutional Responses: Recommendations for Change

Many of the instructors made suggestions unique to their own college. For example, some teachers identified out-of-date rooms (e.g. noisy radiators), while others wanted their college to make greater efforts toward cultural diversity. However, while the responses were characterized most by their differences, there were notable trends. The following are responses and

corresponding numbers/percentages of instructors who identified each college-wide need:

1. Better and more accurate placement process; students are enrolled in English courses that are above their ability: 12 instructors, 32%.
2. Better counseling and advising of students, including areas of scholarships and college funds: 7 instructors, 18%.
3. Class size reduction: 6 instructors, 16%.
4. Greater support for students *at risk:* 5 instructors, 13%.

Additional suggestions that were noted by more than one instructor include the following:

--More computer labs to facilitate writing on word processors.

--More combining of composition courses with other disciplines.

--Class length other than 50 minute periods.

--Support/stipends for faculty released time, especially to experiment with teaching writing and writing components.

Additional Pedagogical Insights and Ideas

For the final response of the questionnaire, instructors were given an open ended question and asked to share additional information or ideas concerning teaching freshman composition.

The rcsponses varied widely reflecting a multiplicity of interests and pedagogical philosophies. A selection of responses include the following:

". . . A teacher must love teaching and his students." --Mary Hyatt, Spokane Falls Community College

"Craftsmen take pains to produce beautiful products. The finished product results from effort. Effort, students need to learn, is necessary." --Gerald Tiffany, Wentachee Valley Community College

"CAI! Having constant access to a 24 station English department controlled computer lab adjacent to the composition classroom (with projection) has had amazing results."--Nancy Howard, Wenatchee Valley Community College

"I use a lot of humor . . . The students work together in pairs or small groups to get to know each other and learn to rely upon each other. I buy readings from all over, often from unexpected sources. I try to help them appreciate good writing wherever it occurs (on cereal boxes, in ads, or on billboards).--Steven Quig, North Seattle Community College

"Students are incredibly literal; they will write exactly what

they think you want, even if they think it's stupid."--Bruce Reid, Edmonds Community College

"I work from the known to the unfamiliar. Early assignments focus on narratives from personal experience. Later assignments build on that by having students use such narratives to support ideas."--Tom Lorentzen, South Seattle Community College

"Being human and approachable are most important, but I'm finding as I get more tired over the year (this is my first year of full-time work) I am retreating more and more into my 'teacher' status."--Louise Peck, Edmonds Community College

"I think all students can learn with time and practice, and we must offer them those opportunities in a safe atmosphere." --Alexis Nelson, Spokane Falls Community College

"Have students use computers, stress prewriting and revision, teach and practice writing as a *process*, keep composition classes small, encourage students to read regularly." --Liz Swanson, Wenatchee Valley Community College

"I'm still guessing at the whole process. I'm a surprise to a lot of students and I think that's useful. When they're surprised

they have to throw out a lot of old ideas and develop new ones."--Molly Tenenbaum, North Seattle Community College

"I think good teachers have dealt with the paradox that while they must have strong egos, a clear sense of self, self confidence, they must also be self-less and self-effacing." --Anonymous, Skagit Valley Community College

Descriptive Findings and Analyses

Instructor Background

The survey revealed that many instructors bring both secondary and university-level teaching experience to their community college teaching. Since nearly half (47%) of community college instructors have taught an average of eight or more years at the high school level, these instructors have a sense of student ability and previous curriculum. Consequently, these instructors are in an excellent position to help students make transitions between high school composition and college composition. Yet, some of the latter questions revealed that many of these same instructors are frustrated at the unprepared high school graduate who has been inadequately trained and who is not yet ready for college level writing.

Since instructors that were selected in the survey averaged nearly 13 years of community college teaching experience, their responses reflect significant years "in the system." Their responses

also reflect the state of teacher and English graduate education over the last three decades.

Significantly, the majority of community college composition instructors (60%) felt poorly prepared by their undergraduate and graduate studies to teach college composition. Most instructors studied literature and other areas that excluded a composition focus. Only three instructors in the survey identified specific courses in rhetoric and only one specified that she had taken a course on how to teach writing. Consequently, most instructors said that they relied on their own writing experience (reflection on how they write) as primary background for teaching composition. While self-reflection is helpful, the potential negative consequence of this is that instructors may not fully recognize the plethora of other ways to approach the writing task, having access only to their own experience. Courses in how to teach composition should be required of all graduate level English students who intend to teach English to provide both theory and practice in instruction.

Most instructors believe that for a composition instructor to be effective he/she must have a superb knowledge base. However, nearly equally important for effective instruction are the personal attributes of compassion/caring, patience, enthusiasm and respect. When asked what the most important characteristics of an effective writing teacher, Sharon Hashimoto, first year composition instructor at Edmonds Community College wrote:

> I wish I could answer this. I think I'm still sorting it all out--but enthusiasm for writing and how important a role it plays in our lives would be a part of it.

In contrast, Tom Lorentzen, a composition instructor for forty years, now teaching at South Seattle Community College stated:

> Willingness to do the day by day work in the classroom, not just escaping to upper division courses in literature, teaching students who already know how to write well. Willingness to make many relevant assignments and responding to the students in a timely fashion, not finding numerous ways not to teach composition.

And Daris Wood, from Centralia Community College in response to this question wrote:

> The ability to stay awake and grade all the thousands of papers! Be able to model/demonstrate good writing skills. Be able to inspire, encourage students to explore by writing.

Instructors recognized distinct differences between students that succeed and students who are at risk. Significantly, teachers did not list superior writing ability/lack of ability or superior/poor skill levels as the important differences between

both groups of students. As hypothesized in earlier parts of this research, motivation, hard work, and a *willingness* to revise are recognized as three of the top four keys to success. In contrast, poor attendance, lack of interest/motivation, and outside distractions are identified by teachers as the top three factors associated with failure. This is consistent with findings reported on in Chapter III and significant in that it points to the importance of helping students in attendance, creating interest, and reducing conflicts with work, family, etc. in an effort to help at-risk students succeed. Developing prerequisite skills are important (listed as third in the factors attributed to failure), but must be addressed in a concerted effort with helping students with these other areas.

Significantly, instructors utilized a variety of teaching strategies with at risk students with over three-fifths of the teachers in the study using individual help/conferences as the primary strategy, followed by other forms of remediation. However, none of the top five strategies listed by instructors addresses the areas that were identified as the greatest hindrance to student success. This seems to suggest that: 1) Teachers respond to helping students in areas that they feel they can control (writing instruction and the writing process), and 2) Teachers and colleges need to have (and utilize) a counseling/motivational/time management intervention process that helps students in areas outside the traditional function and expertise of composition teachers.

Composition instruction is clearly in the process of change: 87% of the teachers questioned were planning some new teaching strategy for the next school year. The influence of technology is obvious, and this trend may increase motivation levels of certain students, as is evidenced in research on the effect of computers in the English class. The increase of interactive/group learning is positive, drawing certain students into learning, but may alienate others who have difficulty interacting with peers.

Teachers who identified institutional changes necessary for increased instructional effectiveness recognized the critical element of intervention to assist the at-risk student. Clearly, these teachers believe that the college must do something more than what is presently being done to help students who require the greatest assistance to succeed.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FRESHMAN COMPOSITION TEACHING STRATEGIES

This questionnaire is part of a state-wide graduate project to assess community college composition instruction. You have been selected because you have been identified as one of several very effective composition instructors at your college. Thank you for reading these directions and responding to the following questions.

Your answers will be combined with those of other instructors and will help develop a report on effective teaching strategies. The responses, which may be published, will suggest a variety of approaches for helping students succeed. All questions in this survey concern English 101, or the equivalent of a first-year (transferable) college composition course. Please answer each question as completely as possible.

Please return your survey on the pre-addressed/pre-stamped envelope enclosed by May 17. For additional information, please contact Scott Douglas Loucks at (206) 952-4892 or at Shoreline Community College, Continuing Education (206) 546-4101.

INSTRUCTOR BACKGROUND, 1-5

1. How many years have you been teaching composition at the community college level? How many years have you taught composition at another level (i.e. high school, four-year university? etc.)

2. How well did your undergraduate and graduate schooling prepare you for effective composition instruction? Briefly explain.

3. What do you see as the most significant lack or irrelevant experience in that preparation, if any?

4. What have been the most positive and/or relevant experiences in helping you to become an effective composition instructor? Why were they significant?

5. What are the most important characteristics of an effective composition instructor?

Students' Backgrounds and Teaching Strategies

6. What characterizes students who excel in your composition course?

7. What teaching strategies do you employ in working with students who typically excel?

8. What characterizes the student who fails or seems likely to fail your composition course?

9. What teaching strategies do you employ with students who seem likely to fail?

10. What teaching strategies do you employ to promote the success of all of your students?

11. What changes do you plan (if any) in your own teaching methods over the next year?

Environment

12. What do you feel are the greatest hindrances to a student's success in first-year college composition?

13. What do you feel are the primary factors that promote student success in first year-college composition?

14. Of those factors which affect success or failure, how many do you feel are within your control and/or influence? Briefly explain.

15. Of those areas not within your control or influence, are there any strategies that the college could employ to increase the probability of success in your courses? Explain.

16. Please share any other helpful insights, philosophies, ideas, or methodologies that you have found particularly effective in working with first year college composition students. (Personal philosophies and testimonies are welcome!)

Name_____
Part-Time or Full Time_____
Phone_____